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## From Recording to Ritual: *Weimar Villa* and *24 City*

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### Abstract

This paper's title is inspired by Guttman's 2004 book *From Ritual To Record*. It examines the remedial and ritual role of cinema in artist film *Weimar Villa* (Bernd Behr, 2010) and critically acclaimed Chinese film *24 City* (Zia Zhang-ke, 2008). The cinematic documentation of newly sprawling urban spaces and of dismantling an old military factory in post-socialist China in these two films, well complements the "xiangchang"—or being on the scene—rhetoric that has governed contemporary independent Chinese documentaries. The function of these two films, I argue, progresses from recording of the actual to the performing of the ritual.

Both of the films' aesthetics and their relationship with modernity provides a comparative framework to forge an interesting relationship between these two films and the modernist city films; *Weimar Villa* alludes to the Weimar culture via the temporal and spatial displacement of Bauhaus style architecture in China, while some of the aesthetic strategies employed in *24 City* resemble the Soviet modernist cinematic movement. I discuss how the modernist and post-socialist "city films" echo each other yet forge diverging relationships to the "promised" modernity, underscoring the historical and ideological disjuncture between these two eras.

**Key words:** City films, *24 City*, Zia Zhang-ke, Bernd Behr, Chinese documentary, artist films, modernity, post-socialist Chinese cinema, *Weimar Villa*, modernist, post-socialist

## Introduction

Images of demolition and construction have become prevalent visual icons in post-socialist Chinese cinema. With the rapid marketization of both urban and rural areas across the People's Republic of China (PRC), it is not only metropolitan areas such as Beijing and Shanghai, but *xiancheng* (县城 the country-level city) and small towns that have also witnessed a drastic transformation of living environment, with old neighbourhoods being quickly replaced by regimented satellite cities and shopping malls (Zhang, 2010). The resultant life styles, as Robin Visser (2010) notes, have become “indiscriminately uprooted” (p.20).

Recent scholarship on the post-socialist Chinese cinema has foregrounded the “documentary impulse” to record demolition sites and the changing cityscape (Lovatt, 2012; Wu 2011; Xu and Andrew, 2011). At first glance, the term “documentary impulse” seems inadequate in considering the effects of cinematic rendering of such change, not to mention that it limits the role of documentary to that of chronicling historic events. Two films—*Weimar Villa: Unreconstructed* (Bernd Behr, 2010) and *24 City* (Jia Zhang-ke, 2008)—that will be discussed here will provide an interesting case study to reconsider the role of cinema in the spectator's experience of the post-socialist modernity. *Weimar Villa* is a film by Taiwanese-German artist Behr, who is based in London. Behr presents a construction site in the then newly developing residential area of Anting New Town—a satellite city at the outskirts of Shanghai—at the time of shooting. On the other hand, in *24 City*, through the interviews of various generations of workers, Jia uncovers the history of a factory called 420 in Chengdu.

This paper, whose title is inspired by Guttman's 2004 book *From Ritual to Record*, can help to illuminate the remedial and ritual role of cinema in these two films, which complements the “documentary impulse”. Allen Guttman (2004) in his work on modern sports traces out the changing status of the Olympics “from ritual to record”—that is, how the Olympics which began as a ritualistic ceremony has become the international event for public entertainment. Luke McKernan (2011) further hones into the relationship between “rituals” and “record” in his discussion of the cinematic treatment of the Olympics in the 1920s, pointing out their contrasting impulses to document and dramatize. A similar tension perhaps governs the films that will be discussed here; their function progresses from recording of the actual to the performing of the ritual.

My approach here is comparative in terms of both the films' aesthetics and their relationship with modernity. *Weimar Villa* alludes to the Weimar culture via the temporal and spatial displacement of Bauhaus style architecture in China, while some of the aesthetic strategies employed in *24 City* resemble the Soviet modernist cinematic movement. The cinematic documentation of newly sprawling urban spaces and their inhabitants in post-socialist China, however, betray a tendency that is in contrast to the abstract, utopian portrayal of modern cities in such films as *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927) and *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929). I discuss how the modernist and post-socialist “city films” echo each other yet forge diverging relationships to the “promised” modernity, underscoring the historical and ideological disjuncture between these two eras; by analysing their formal similarities and contrasts, I hope to show their perspectives on the respective urban modernity, to which they actively respond and, perhaps contemplatively react.

***Weimar Villa***

Behr's work is slightly below ten minutes, consisting of construction footage of the Bauhaus inspired Anting New Town in China—footage shot in 2008. *Weimar Villa* (2010) reflects Behr's continuing interest in the co-dependency between architecture and cinema and the performative aspect of architecture that is culturally and spatially dislocated. In his previous work, *House without a Door* (2006), Behr uses footage that he shot of a replica of a Berlin housing estate that was built in Utah in the 1940s and has existed since the Second World War. In 1943, a German émigré Erich Mendelsohn and the Hollywood studio RKO were commissioned to design and furnish the replica, in order to test the military incendiary bombs that would be used in the air raids on Dresden and Berlin ("House without a Door," 2006). The title of Behr's work, adopted from *House without a Door* (1914), an early German expressionist film that no longer exists, alludes to his inability to get permission to film inside the replica and serves as a reminder of Mendelsohn's previous association with the German Expressionist theatre. Behr thus fictionalizes the interior space of this "German Village" in Utah with the images from expressionist films such as *Faust* (F.W. Murnau, 1926) and *Dr. Mabuse* (Fritz Lang, 1921). The images of the test site are also followed by pulsating shots of a house being built in the vicinity—a nearby town called Faust. The continuity between *House Without a Door* and *Weimar Villa* is apparent via their shared affiliation with, and allusion to, the legacy of the Weimar period (1918-1933) and their shared fascination with the reconstruction of Bauhaus architecture transplanted to 'other' localities: from Berlin to Utah in the US in the former and from Bauhaus to Anting New Town in China in the latter. *Weimar Villa* needs, however, to be carefully situated within the context of Shanghai's 'peri-urbanization' (Yu, 2009) as Behr's work is in conversation with the Chinese government's rhetoric of the modernization and mega-urbanization.

Initiated in 2001 under former Mayor Chen Liangyu, Shanghai underwent drastic suburbanization under the banner of "One City Nine Towns". Local district governments were closely involved with the planning, land acquisition, and construction of the infrastructure, in cooperation with large international architectural firms and local developers (Wang, Kundu, and Chen, 2010). Chen announced that nine towns would adopt the styles of Western cities, with some of their master plans chosen through international competitions: Songjiang was modelled after a British style, Anting German and Pujiang Italian, to list a few. These suburbs are designed to attract and disperse the population of Shanghai (14.8 million permanent residents in 2000) by turning rural land into residential areas. A rationale behind adopting such Western styles is, as Charlie Xue and Minghao Zhou (2007) note, "to break through the monotonous model of rural town construction and build a new order and identity for the rest of the developments" (p.22).



Figure 1. Anting New Town in the “Bauhaus” style



Figure 2. A couple having their wedding photo taken in Thames Town

A gap between the original intention to solve the problems of the overpopulated megacity and its consequences has become increasingly apparent. Songjiang “Thames” Town and Anting “German” Town, which were designated as two pilot projects of the “One City Nine Towns” plan, suffered from low occupancy due to the lack of local infrastructure. Most of the properties in Songjiang, for instance, were sold out for investment purposes rather than for living in, and the subsequent lack of community has now turned it into “a ghost town,” in which one can occasionally spot young couples (figure 2), who have their wedding photos taken in front of the landmark places (Wang et al. 2010). It has become, borrowing the term employed by Yomi Braester (2010), an “absurd transnational space” (p.300) outside Shanghai, which provides a tourist destination for those who can’t afford to travel abroad.

The media hype surrounding Anting “German” Town centers around the Speer Legacy: Albert Speer Jr., who is Head of the German architecture firm Albert Speer and Partners (AS & P GmbH) and whose master plan for Anting New town was adopted, is the son of Albert Speer, Hitler’s favourite architect (“Architect Sheds His Father’s Legacy in China,” 2004). AS & P opened an office in China in 1999 and won the contract for the design of the Shanghai International Automobile City in 2001. The Beijing Olympics Committee also signed with Speer Jr. for his plan to build a boulevard connecting the central axis of Beijing to the Olympic park, which further spurred more media frenzy with regard to a tenuous parallel between Nazi Germany and contemporary China (Smith and Banegal, 2007).

Anting New Town has a higher occupancy than Songjiang but still failed to serve its original purpose—to attract and accommodate the residents of Shanghai (with its population reaching 19.2 million at the end of 2009) as well as to serve the needs of the Shanghai automobile industry (Wang et al, 2010). Commuting from Shanghai via metro is feasible thanks to the No. 11 line, but the actual commuting time is a lot longer as Anting New Town is 2 kilometres away from the metro station, which takes 10 minute by bus ride and 25 minute by foot. Furthermore, a heavy reliance on the automobile (via Hu-Ning expressway) as a major form of transportation keeps low-income households from renting the properties in the area. Local landowners and residents, who were moved out of their houses for the redevelopment, cannot afford the rent and living costs, while the lack of commercial, medical and educational facilities make it difficult for the new owners to inhabit. It did attract, though, some foreign nationals; within the permanent residents of Anting New Town, half of them are

German, employed by Shanghai Volkswagen Co Ltd (Wang et al, 2010). As Wang, Kundu and Cheng (2010) put it, “the exclusive planning without local residents created a new settlement on farmland without any consideration of local living demand” (p.335).

The analysis of Behr’s work further needs to take into consideration the film’s exhibition venue. When I first saw his film at the Whitstable Biennale in Kent UK, it was shown in a loop with other films programmed under “UR-NOW: The Ruins of the Contemporary” which includes *Workers Leaving the Factory* (Harun Farocki, 1995) among others. The endless looping throughout the day affects the viewing experience, with no clear beginning and end to the film. Behr’s work as a whole even further disorients the viewer. As the film begins, it appears that the “documentary impulse” dominates the film—it is a recording of a construction site. Off-screen sound of drilling introduces the viewer to the construction site of white buildings, which instantly allude to the Bauhaus, with the workers in the middle ground partially hidden behind concrete blocks (figure 3). However, one would soon realize that such a diagnosis is too quick. With some of the shots shown in reverse while others’ temporality remaining ambiguous, the construction site becomes “un-re-constructed,” as the sub-title of his piece indicates.



Figure 3. The opening shot



Figure 4. Two workers carrying a cart

Some viewers may immediately detect the reverse motion of the first few shots, but they are very subtle. Most viewers would not notice it until a few minutes into the film, when one sees two workers moving backwards—one in the blue uniform is pulling, while the other is pushing a cart from behind (figure 4). The presence of human figures with movement helps the viewer to identify the direction and temporality of their actions.

A stylistic suspense builds up as the film alternates between shots in regular and reverse motion. The mood of the site also shifts between realistic and magical, fluctuating between serene and cheerful. The site becomes haunting, with shots of empty buildings, although off-screen sounds of swishing, pulsating noise indicates the presence of workers or machines being operated nearby. A shot of five or six workers walking backward in perfect line with their heads down makes them look like zombies (figure 5), as if it foretells the future ghostliness of the town. The idea of “haunting” with or without the appearance of ghost in Chinese cinema, claim Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar (2006), disrupts the progress of linear time, constituting “a refusal of the sequential logic of modern “progress”” (p.32).





Figure 5. Workers walking like zombies.



Figure 6. A concrete block magically flies into the hand of a worker.

It is useful to compare here the backward motion employed with that in Dziga Vertov's *Kino Eye* (1924), especially a segment in which the entire process of production, distribution, and consumption of bread are shown backwards and in reversed motion: from the final product, a loaf of bread, to its baking, to the transportation and distribution of its ingredients, and to the processing and harvesting of wheat. Its reversed chronology serves the epistemic purpose in Vertov's film; that is, the film enables the viewer to "see" the social relations which Vertov adamantly believed film has the capacity and duty to reveal (Turvey, 2009). In *Kino Eye*, it is the reversed chronology that primarily helps urge the viewer to make the connections between the consumers in the city, the bakers in the factory, and the farmers in the field.

In contrast, backward motion in *Weimar Villa* reverses the goal and outcome of the workers' actions. Reverse motion not only facilitates workers' tasks but also makes their labour futile. Shown in reverse, heavy concrete blocks can magically jump into a worker's hands without him even trying to lift it (figure 6). The paint on the wall is removed, reverting the site back to the moment when more than half of the wall needs to be filled. Moreover, such reversed action helps the viewer to re-identify the worker's action in Behr's film. Pushing becomes pulling; hammering extracting; breaking gluing; painting erasing; and construction becomes paradoxically both un- or re-construction. There is an ethical dimension to this reversal; as Behr claims during a personal interview with the author (Behr, personal communication, July 21, 2010), workers' quotidian activities become ritualistic. Bobby Alexander (1997) notes that the ritual could be defined as "a performance, planned or improvised, that effects a transition from everyday life to an alternative context within which the everyday is transformed" (p.139). Religious rituals, which Alexander focuses on, help to yield in the participants an experience of the transcendental reality or ultimate being. Behr's work underscores instead the medium's ritualistic capacity in transforming the everyday actions recorded, attributing to the workers' actions alternative meanings or even parallel reality.

One may associate Behr's work with a dominant form of critique on the consequences of the Chinese government's desire to leap forward. A visual allusion to the emblematic modern architecture may point to an apparent irony manifest in the planning of Anting New Town. The goal of the Bauhaus—"the attempt to reorganize life...to reconfigure the relation of objects to practice" (Schwartz, 2009, p.79) — does not seem to be materialized in Anting New Town yet. If functionalism or at least a discourse on functionalism was the driving force behind the inauguration and dispersion of the Bauhaus across the world, the basic function of architecture—

“dwelling” (Heidegger cited in Schwartz, 2009, p.72)—is absent in the houses in Anting. A Bauhaus style has been franchised yet has quickly become an empty icon, serving no purpose other than being a vehicle to generating profits for the real estate market and to ignite a lukewarm zeal for local tourism. The Bauhaus style buildings in Anting New Town may have become just ornamental.

During the interview conducted by the author, however, Behr (Personal communication, 2010) expresses reservations on the teleological assumptions underneath the criticism entertained above—that is, the Chinese urban development and its resulting eclectic cityscape viewed as “ironic” or even “ludicrous”. Behr continued, claiming that his film does not present a derogatory look at the simulacra. Rather the role of his film is “performative” in the sense that it engages in a dialogue with, both the site and its complex history embodied. The German Bauhaus and the “German Town” in Shanghai do not form a hierarchical relationship of the original and a copy, where the latter is measured and criticized against the former. Instead, Behr notes, *Weimar Villa* provides another vantage point to look back the modernity at its inception and its reconfiguration in the current state.

Behr’s *Weimar Villa* visually suspends and amends the present; the past merged with the present through its temporary reversals; the present co-existing with the future. Reversed motion not only changes the functions of actions, but also withholds the construction from its completion. The Chinese government incessant effort to “catch up” through the top-down urbanization is on halt, though only momentarily, and the blind desire to “leap forward” is counterbalanced by literally “moving backwards”. Through Behr’s work, the construction site provides an in-between-moment that encompasses both building and digging, constructing and decaying, the present and the past, and the present and the future. Unlike Vertov’s *Kino Eye*, *Weimar Villa* is neither didactic nor epistemic. Its goal is neither to criticize the urban planning in Shanghai, nor to underscore the deplorable vacancy of the site in the near future (although one can read it in such a way). The ritualistic role of cinema is what it departs from, and complements, the “preservational mode” of the New Documentary in China that emphasizes the ephemerality (or even spectacle) of demolition sites (Braester, 2010).

## **24 City**

Cinematic allusions to early actuality and modernist films in *24 City* are prevalent throughout the film. Such allusions not only make the film increasingly self-reflexive about the medium, forging an intertextual relationship with the films of the 1920s, but also invite the viewer to reflect upon that modernity. The film’s working title, *Leaving the Factory*, refers to the Lumière’s Brothers documentary origin (Rayns, 2010). The film indeed begins with a shot of workers in blue uniforms on their bikes passing the entrance gate of the factory, which is counterpoised, half way through the film, by a corollary shot of the workers leaving the factory. The visual similarity as well as contrast with the Soviet constructivist aesthetic further underscores the different stages they occupy in relation to cinematic history. When workers are seen operating the machines inside the factory, the pacing and atmosphere reminds the viewer of comparable scenes in *Strike* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925) or in *Man with a Movie Camera*.





Figure 7. Workers inside the factory



Figure 8. Workers ascending the stairs

In several shots, including the opening sequence, we see several workers operating machines. In contrast to the fast-paced, exuberant rhythm in the constructivist films, the film protrudes instead a languid pace, denying the celebration of the modern present in those earlier films. Jia states that the faded green hue of both interiors and machines further accentuates the outdated look of the factory; “this green color comes from real life. It represents my memory about that old system, the China that dates from more than a decade ago certainly. And the most important thing is that it still exists.” (Figure 7; Andrew, 2009, p.80) The disappearance of the socialist ideals is underscored in the monotonous facial expressions of a female worker, whose labour has lost the purpose or meaning within the community or nation. Her look seems to be in sharp contrast with that of a factory girl in *Man with a Movie Camera* whose swift hands fold boxes while she is smiling. The visual conflict of the workers ascending the stairs in contrasting directions (figure 8) reminds of a scene in such modernist film as *Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein, 1925) where the townspeople are gathering at the pier for the funeral of Bolshevik sailor Vakulinchuk. Jia’s allusion to soviet filmmakers becomes more explicit in his next film, *I Wish I Knew* (2010), in which the stone lion statues roar in the beginning of the film. Such visual allusion further helps forge both aesthetic and historical relationships between European modernist and Asian postsocialist city films.

Intercut between the process of emptying and the dismantling of the factory, nine interviews —some real and some fictional—present a history of Factory 420 intertwined with the process of development and transformation of Chengdu and the displacement and settlement of workers who were assigned to work at the factory. The film helps to empty the factory by extracting the memories of these workers who migrated, settled, and worked for the factory, and their children’s generation, whose lives tangentially touch on the socialist phase of the factory, and who refuse to play a part in its continuing legacy.

Factory 420 was founded as a secret manufacturer of military aircraft engines, transformed into a facility that produces domestic goods, and is eventually handed over to a real-estate development company. Interviews with different generations of workers and residents constitute the organic history of Factory 420 from its birth, growth, decline and rebirth. This collective history, however, falls short of reaching the organic unity between the modern life and workers as seen in *Man with a Movie Camera*. In the Soviet film, the unity between the city and its inhabitants is not only conveyed through the rhythm of the workers’ activities that are in perfect sync with that of both the city and its machines, but also through human life cycles embedded in the film: we have glimpses of a baby being born, a couple getting a divorce and a woman weeping for the death of a loved one (Michelson, 1984). However, unlike European city films

of the 1920s which underscore the industrial, synchronic time of modernity with social relations as a very integral part of the city, *24 City* foregrounds the diachronic history of the city of Chengdu, which underwent its transformation from a prosperous town in the ancient period, through a period as industrial city during the socialist modernization, and finally to a residential and shopping district, called “24 City,” which is named after an ancient poem about Chengdu.

Although Jia claims that the nine interviews form a collective memory of Factory 420 with the workers’ interviews often contrasting the then and the now of the factory, the film’s mise-en-scene constantly juxtaposes the workers as collective versus individual identities and their corresponding activities: labour vs. leisure. In a still shot of hundreds of anonymous workers singing during the land transfer ceremony for Chengfa Group, a parent company of Factory 420, their expressionless faces fill the entire shot with the individuality of the workers being completely erased, denying any foreshadowing for the subject of the interviews that soon follow. In fact the first interviewee, He Kikun is absent from the scene and instead is shown going up the empty stairs perhaps spatially adjacent to the hall, as one can still hear the speech of the president of the Group from the hall. A more personalized musical performance appears later in the film. When Little Flower (played by Joan Chen) is introduced prior to her interview, she partakes in a casual performance of the *yue* opera, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, at the workers’ leisure center. As she walks to the screen right, the camera moves with her, visually demarcating her as the next interview subject. The contrast between the anonymous workers versus an individual, manifest through the repetition of similar activities—musical performances—for different occasions, is further demarcated by style here.

In a similar manner, the political identity of the factory which represents the Chinese government war efforts in the 1950s, is curtailed by the mise-en-scene. The image of the deteriorated factory no longer carries the same magnitude of symbolic control as it had done in the past. A space for the workers’ ceremony turns into that for leisure. During the second interview with Secretary Guan conducted in a hall, there is a cut to two workers who are playing badminton on the stage against the painted backdrop of the two sets of four missiles behind the Great Wall that point at each other, the right set of which have already been launched. A parallel visual trajectory between the missiles in the painting and that of the badminton shuttlecock flying in the air further reveals the lost *raison d’être* of the factory.

The inevitability of the arrival of the liberated market economy, and the inability to reverse such a trajectory are signalled both by the film’s structure and the numerous poems and intertitles inserted throughout. A shot of a vehicle that drives through Chengdu, carrying a piece of dismantled factory equipment, is repeated both in the beginning and toward the end of the film (figure 9, 10), bookmarking the interviews with the migrated generation.



Figure 9. A truck driving through the street, carrying a dismantled piece of machinery



Figure 10. The same shot repeated for less of duration

As smoke comes out of, and blurs, the demolition site of the factory, *Spilt Milk* written by W.B. Yeats is layered over the image (figure 11), which further reinforces the idea of inevitability, *biran* (必然):

Things that we have thought and done,  
Must (*biran*) ramble, and thin out  
Like milk spilt on a stone.



Figure 11. The smoke from the demolition is marked by Yeats' *Spilt Milk*.

*The Internationale* sung by workers in the previous shot, provides an ironic sound bridge as it continues in the shot of the factory being exploded. As the poem connotes, with the demolition of the factory its memory would eventually disappear into the dust, but the film contributes to holding onto the memory of the workers and their families a little while longer.

In his interview with Dudley Andrew (2009), Jia informs us that the selection and construction of interviews is to present the “collective” memory of Factory 420. Jia claims that he interviewed over fifty subjects, but thought “nine characters become one when put together...What is left is common experience, which to most Chinese is common knowledge. These experiences are not very idiosyncratic or unique...What I filmed is not individual cases but collective memories” (Andrew, 2009, p.82). The interviewees are carefully chosen and constructed, but what they share is their estranged relationship with peers, family, and lovers. Hou Lijun’s heart-felt story about her grandparents underscores the difficulty in staying in touch with her grandparents once her mother migrated from Shenyang to Chengdu for her work. Dali (performed by Lu Liping) shares a painful anecdote of losing her child on her long journey to Chengdu. Song Weidong (performed by actor Chen Jianbin) reminisces over the breakup with his

girlfriend, as she had to move to another city for college. Little Flower (Joan Chen) contemplates and consoles herself over her single life, as she recalls her ill-fated romance with a man from a good family. Su Na (Zhao Tao) wishes to make enough money so that she could purchase a flat in 24 City and offer comfortable living for her parents.

The portraits of the anonymous workers who are not included in the nine main interviews, with the exception of Master Wang's family, may further point to the "representative" nature of the interviews selected. Workers are posed for the camera, artificially and even awkwardly. In these cinematic portraits, the emulation of, and differentiation from, still photography, provides another point of contrast with *Man with a Movie Camera*. Vertov alternates between still frames of a horse carriage with images of bourgeois women, and a close up of a little girl marvelling at the street magic show and their corresponding "moving images," the strips of which are being edited. Vertov's editing among the still frames, moving images, and the filmstrip, brings to the fore both the specificity of the film medium and the self-reflexive nature of his filmmaking. In contrast, Jia's cinematic portraits of these workers (figure 12-15) are not the snap shots of their memories. Rather, their function is similar to the reverse motion in Behr's *Weimar Villa*, in that it merges the temporality of the past and the present. If we follow Roland Barthes' (1977) observation on the temporality of still photography and of film—that is, photographic medium is of the past tense, while film of the present tense—Jia's cinematic portraits of workers underscores the present that is on the verge of turning into the past (as when you pose for a photograph). Human subjects are not completely still in their posture and always move a little, which make them oscillate between the apparent past and the present.



Figure 12. A portrait of Wang's family



Figure 13. A portrait of a family



Figure 14. A portrait of a female factory worker



Figure 15. A portrait of comrades

Philippa Lovatt (2012) in her analysis of *24 City* considers the temporality of these portraits as “now-time”—the filmed subjects’ embodied presence—instead of the past. In these shots, she pays attention to the lack of sonic markers that underscore industrial time, such as a clock ticking or machines operating, in favour of the sounds of the human subject. Lovatt (2012) notes, “each stray sound emitted by the body, such as a swallow, a sniff or a cough, is picked up in aural closeup...thus reinforcing this sense of embodied presentness” (p. 434-5). Although her observation is insightful in regards to certain shots, the sonic structure of portraits is not consistent throughout the film. For instance, the shot of a girl in the factory (figure 14) is accompanied by the sound of a heavy fan spinning. Some portraits are shown with non-diegetic background music, which erases *both* the industrial noise *and* the sound of human presence. These moments, as Lovatt suggests, may halt the rhetoric of official discourse of progress and invite the viewers to reflect on the now. But if the present tense in these shots is indeed the “now-time,” it is the “now-time” that is inevitably to become history and historical record.

In his interview with Andrew (2009), Jia further points out the *ritualistic* function of the apparent “stillness”. Jia claims that he had people sit in front of the camera and let the camera run from a couple of minutes up to fifty minutes, in order for him to look for the subtle changes of expression and to display the workers’ interiority. This search for interiority through silence “later became a ritual in our shooting. For me these portraits are not just people’s faces nor do some form complementary to their narration, nor even a mere ritual. For through that ritual we sense that many lives have been ignored, ordinary people’s lives ignored. We hope that through time, through silence, and through this ritual, the film can help these people achieve some recognition.” (Andrew, 2009, p.82)

Throughout the film, these workers, whose life experience or memory may disappear from the public arena with the demolition of the factory, “recollect” their memory and would be remembered as an integral part of the old community that has already been in the process of transformation. Catherine Bell (1997) notes in her discussion of Durkheim that he saw “ritual as the means by which individuals are brought together as a collective group” (p.25).

Yomi Braester (2010) notes, “in portraying the city as scarred by demolition, films unearth the traumas of urban development and give the wounds a visual form. In recording the erased architectural placeholders of memory, films become monuments to that loss” (p.227). Jia’s film could be aligned with such a movement, but I hope to show how his aesthetics further forges another connection; with the practice of modernist filmmaking, which idealizes the role of workers within the newly formed socialist society, a role is significantly altered and reconfigured, with the advent of the post-socialist economy in China.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I hope to make various connections between the two films in focus, and the modernist aesthetic manifest in city symphonies of the 1920s. The speed, acceleration, and energy in modern city films have disappeared, and are replaced in contemporary city films (the ones that I have studied here) by a slow-paced, contemplation, and a cinematic attempt to suspend progress. What I aim to show here is the constructive vs. remedial role of the cinematic medium foregrounded in the modernist filmmaking and contemporary post-socialist filmmaking, respectively, and their relationship to the cities, both rising and collapsing, and their impact on the human subjects. If film techniques such as backward motion, and the mixed aesthetic of still photography and cinema, are used to show off the capacity/specificity of the cinematic medium as a part of modernity that celebrate, similar cinematic techniques are

employed to underscore the gap between the modernity aspired for, and reconfigured in, post-socialist China.



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